

DRAFT

Designing Our Future: A Blueprint for Transforming Vermont's Education System

**Agency of Administration
Agency of Commerce and Community Development
Agency of Digital Services
Agency of Education
Agency of Human Services
Department of Labor**

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Introduction

In 1968, the Vermont State Board of Education published its Vermont Design for Education, a document that described the concept of making the personal learning aspirations of students the focus of the education process. Since that time, many changes have occurred to the Vermont education system that have distracted Vermont from achieving this vision.

One of the most significant changes was Act 60 of 1997, a major revision to Vermont's education funding system because of the Brigham decision. Although the Brigham decision settled the issue that the state, not locals, was ultimately responsible for the education of Vermont's students, the new education funding system designed through Act 60 did not envision changes to the education delivery system itself; it was a patch for the legacy governance structure that was established in the late 1880s.

Education is a process conceived to benefit the learner. Central to any focus is the individual and how his learning process may be maximized. This idea is basic and provides the foundation of all other elements of education.

Vermont Design for Education. 1968

The statewide education funding system created under Act 60 and the successor legislation of Act 68, however, did expose the inefficiencies of the old governance structure. The new funding system caused education spending to increase as districts with relatively smaller grand lists could increase their spending levels without seeing significant increases to their tax rates. At about the same time, the number of students in Vermont started to decline following a larger demographic trend witnessed throughout northern New England. This combination of increases in education spending coupled with declines in the number of students caused significant pressure on the education funding system since the diffused nature of the Vermont's education governance structure was not able to respond to these challenges in a systematic manner.

During the same period, federal education policy in the form of the No Child Left Behind Act, put new requirements on states to develop school accountability systems. These policies created new challenges for Vermont's education governance structure which in many cases was comprised of school districts too small to yield valid accountability data. The data did identify, however, a persistent equity gap in student achievement between students in poverty and their non-poverty peers.

Faced with challenges in affordability, equity, and accountability, policy makers increasingly began to focus on school district governance reform. Starting with Act 153 of 2010, the General Assembly began to formally explore the incentivization of school district consolidation. Act 153 was largely voluntary, however, resulting in few district mergers. Act 153 did require the centralization of certain school district services at the supervisory union level which forced

many school districts to adjust how they provided these services and to seek greater efficiencies by sharing services with neighboring districts. After several statewide conversations about governance reform including the Green Mountain Imperative in 2015 which was co-sponsored by the Vermont Business Roundtable, the Legislature passed Act 46 in 2015 which called for a less-than-voluntary approach to school district governance reform.

Although the jury is still out on Act 46, one common thread throughout all these policy initiatives is they do not include a central design or focus. From Act 60 to Act 46, the common policy approach has been to tinker with the system and hope for the best. This lack of policy coherence has led to a significant amount of “initiative fatigue” in Vermont’s education system. A similar amount of systems fatigue has been observed in the delivery of related human resource systems such as child services, early learning and care, and mental health. This concern about systems capacity points to a need to rethink education, social, and economic policies to provide a more effective and integrated approach, especially considering Vermont’s current and future demographic challenges.

The Demographic and Efficiency Context

Vermont is facing a very challenging demographic situation. Our K-12 infrastructure was built for more than 100,000 students, but enrollment has declined to 76,000 in the last twenty years – a decline of about 27,000 students. All counties have experienced drastic reductions in traditional K-12 enrollment since 2004. Five counties have experienced K-12 enrollment losses of over 20%, with Essex County having lost over 40% of its K-12 enrollment. Only Franklin County and Lamoille County have lost less than 10% of their K-12 enrollment, and the U.S. Department of Education predicts Vermont student count will drop below 70,000 by 2026.

Unfortunately, Vermont’s education spending has not decreased at the same rate. According to the National Education Association, in the 2015-2016 school year Vermont’s per pupil expenditure was \$23,352, or \$2,000 more per pupil than New York who spent the second most. This compares to a national average of \$11,787 per pupil. This should not be surprising since 80% of school district costs are tied directly to personnel, and Vermont’s school employee staff-to-student ratio has shrunk to 4.25 to 1, the lowest in the nation.

There is no simple policy solution for this complex situation. Ronald Heifetz of Harvard University might describe this context as a series of “adaptive challenges” (Heifetz, 1994). According to Heifetz (1994), adaptive challenges require new solutions, solutions that require a consideration of what must be given up to thrive relative to what cannot be compromised to be successful in the future. Basically, Vermont’s education delivery will need to adapt to the current demographic context to be successful. We will need to redesign our education delivery system not just make incremental adjustments. This will mean taking a different approach to developing education policy than has been used in the past.

Representative Strategy vs. Design Strategy

Two strategies often used to create policies are representative strategies and design strategies. A representative strategy is often used when a solution to a problem already exists, and when affirmation of stakeholder values or current practices supersedes the need for change. Through a representative strategy, each major stakeholder is invited to participate in creating the new policy approach to ensure continuity with the past and to ensure stakeholder buy-in during implementation. This has been the typical approach to Vermont education policy development.

A design strategy, on the other hand, is more useful when there is a need to create a new policy solution. With a design strategy, a small design team is assembled with the goal of rapidly creating a viable design prototype. Membership on the design team is not necessarily representative, but rather determined by the ability of the chosen team members to rapidly produce a high-quality prototype, a prototype that can then be shared broadly among various stakeholder groups for feedback and reaction.

To focus stakeholder feedback using a design strategy, essential design elements for the prototype are developed. Stakeholder feedback is measured against these desired design elements as opposed to comparing it to perceptions of the current system since by definition the new system is designed to be different. For example, if an architect was designing a new house for a client, the architect would first seek to determine the client's essential design elements for a new house (e.g. three bathrooms, fieldstone fireplace, etc.) that need to be incorporated into the new design. A consideration of the design elements relative to the client's current house might not be relevant, especially if the design of the current house has been deemed to be inadequate to meet the client's future needs.

A design strategy approach would seem to more applicable to the Vermont context since Vermont will be facing a series of adaptive challenges that will require new solutions. In the case of education policy, a design prototype would be in the form of a blueprint that includes the overarching design elements and a description of the desired end state. From there, a series of "design challenges" would be organized to address specific technical areas and to further refine the model based on focused stakeholder feedback.

Education Policy Design Team

Governor Phil Scott has outlined broad policy goals for Vermont. These goals include making Vermont more affordable, growing the economy, and protecting Vermont's most vulnerable citizens. These broad goals have been further delineated into a statewide strategic plan. Education policy was determined to be an intersecting point among the strategic plan goals education policy since it is central to many other aspects of policy.

In the fall of 2018, an education policy design team was formed to pursue a new and more comprehensive policy approach to education. Members of this team (hereinafter "The Team") included the Secretaries of Commerce and Community Development, Digital Services,

Education, Human Services, the Commissioner of Labor, and staff from the Governor's office. The goal of the education policy design team was to produce a "policy blueprint" to guide future policy decisions. This blueprint is broken down into sections including: 1) design elements, 2) education delivery system structure, and 3) future design challenges.

Education Policy Design Elements

The Team reviewed the current structure of Vermont's education policies, social policies, and economic development policies. Additionally, the Team considered the demographic context of the state. Based on this review, the Team determined the future education system should be designed around the following design elements.

Commentary		
The system should be flexible enough to meet the personal learning aspirations of each student.		The current system creates barriers for access to high quality learning opportunities for all students.
The system should be better integrated with the social service delivery system.		Social services are not well integrated with education systems in all regions of the state. The system is highly dependent on quasi formal collaboration among agencies.
The system should put an increased focus on early learning and care.		Investments in early learning and care need to be better integrated between health and education systems.
The system should put a focus on teacher quality.		Teacher quality systems are too complex and rely on legacy systems such as local standards boards and cumbersome portfolio processes. There needs to be a better connection between pre-service licensing and in-service development.
The system should support the use of quality data.		The complexity and scale of the current system inhibits the efficient collection, arrangement, and visualization of data to guide decision making.
The system should support a more efficient and responsive approach to curriculum and professional development.		Many districts and schools work in relative isolation in terms of curriculum and professional development causing quality and equity gaps. The constant "reinventing of the wheel" is a drain on the capacity of teachers and systems.
The system should support the broader social and economic development of our state.		Currently, the investment in education is not seen as part of a broader investment in the future vitality of the state. Regional economic planning is not necessarily related to education planning.
The system should be more nimble, efficient, and effective.		The current system is too complex, too expensive, and too difficult to manage. Effectiveness and equity indicators could be better utilized if the system were simplified.

Prototype for A New Education Delivery System Structure

The Team considered the above design elements when contemplating a new design for the education delivery system. The Team also reviewed the structure of other education delivery systems including the State of Hawaii (the simplest model - Hawaii has a single school district with more than twice as many students as Vermont) and the Province of New Brunswick (a system in the region that went through a major redesign in 2000). The goal was to articulate a system structure “end state” that would be both more nimble and responsive while at the same time ensuring local community participation. What follows is a brief description of how this new design would work around specific areas.

Roles and Responsibilities

The system would consist of a single statewide school district. Students would have statewide school choice among all the public schools, technical centers, and non-sectarian independent schools approved by the Agency.

The system would be directed by the Secretary of Education and administered by the Agency of Education. The current State Board of Education would be abolished in favor of having the General Assembly and Governor being the primary entities responsible for education policy like other policy areas within the state.

The system would be administered by a series of four Regional School Boards (Northern Region, Chittenden Region, Central Region, and Southern Region) which would be comprised of locally-elected representatives and led by a regional Superintendent. The regional entities would be administrative entities not school districts. The regional school board would hire its superintendent, have policy authority, and be responsible for monitoring student outcomes relative to the goals of its regional continuous improvement plan.

The regional superintendent would supervise the operations of all the schools in the region. The superintendent would have the authority to hire and dismiss all regional staff and would be responsible for developing the regional expenditure budget and the regional continuous improvement plan.

Each school would be required to have a Parent School Committee. These committees would advise school principals on various aspects relative to operating a school, but the principal would have final authority and responsibility for school decisions.

The principal's major function would be to operate a school and to develop a school improvement plan. Principals would report directly to the regional superintendent in the performance of their duties.

Teachers would become state employees of the single statewide school district. There would be one teacher contract.

Schools

Current school property would be transferred to the state for operation by the statewide school district. If the state determines to not operate a school at a future date, the original municipal owner of the school would have the right of first refusal to purchase the school under the same terms as those used when ownership was transferred to the state.

Subject to the approval of the Secretary, a regional school board would have authority to close schools consistent with the following parameters: 1) ensure an “educational home” for early learning in literacy through grade 4 in each community as practicable, 2) diverse and expansive learning opportunities on a regional basis for all students in grades 5-8, and 3) flexible academic and applied learning pathways for all students in grades 9-12.

Student Learning

The scope of authority over compulsory education would begin at age 5 and end at age 18. Each student would have a personal learning plan starting in Kindergarten. Early learning and care will be coordinated on a regional basis and supervised by the regional superintendent using a mix of public and private providers. Early learning and care would be targeted to ensure all students begin Kindergarten ready to learn. Primary grades instructional systems will be focused on ensuring each student is reading on grade level by the end of grade 4 as measured by a state-established benchmarking assessment.

Curriculum and Professional Development

The Agency would be required to establish standards for educational curricula. Specific state curriculum would be developed by state-level, teacher-led Curriculum Design Councils and then implemented in each school. The Agency would supervise and coordinate statewide professional development to support the development of teacher quality, and to ensure the equitable dissemination of high quality instructional materials and expertise.

Data Systems

School-related data systems would be centralized at the state level. Since all school employees would be state employees, HR and accounting functions would be centralized at the state level as well.

Educator Licensure

Teachers and administrators graduating from an approved Vermont higher education program would be granted an initial provisional license. The assignment of a regular license would be made after the satisfactory completion of three years of successful teaching/administrative experience and upon the recommendation of a regional superintendent. True reciprocity with other states would be established for educators completing an approved licensure program in another state. Initial licensure through reciprocity would be for a provisional license only. Re-licensure based on the accumulation of a certain number of professional development hours consistent with the educator’s plan for professional development would be granted upon the recommendation of a regional superintendent.

Access to Post-Secondary Learning

Needs-based scholarships would be provided to support student access to post-secondary and higher education learning opportunities at state institutions in exchange for a commitment on the part of the student to live and work in the state for a certain number of years.

Budgeting

Each regional superintendent would prepare an expenditure budget for his or her region and submit the budget to the Secretary for approval. The Secretary would be responsible for creating an overall education budget which would be submitted to the General Assembly for approval as part of the regular state budgeting process.

Regional Social Services

Social service regions will be redrawn to be consistent with each educational region and integrated to the greatest extent possible.

Regional Economic Development Planning

Economic development regions will be redrawn to be consistent with each educational region. Each regional superintendent shall work closely with economic planning officials to ensure educational assets are deployed in a manner consistent with the region's economic development goals and the state's strategic plan.

Future Design Challenges

Redesigning the structure of Vermont's education delivery system will be complex work, but once a desired "end state" is articulated, specific areas of future design work can be identified. In support of this future work, the Team has identified a few areas for focused study.

Education Finance System

The current education finance system will need to be restructured around the assumption of a single school district with a single tax rate. This would be an opportunity to also consider redesigning the Common Level of Appraisal (CLA) system. The revenue mix for education funding should also be evaluated.

Regional Infrastructure

This blueprint anticipates the creation of larger regional administrative entities to replace the current supervisory union and supervisory district central office functions. Since HR and other back office functions would be centralized at the state level, a new staffing pattern for these entities would have to be established. These central offices should be located coincidentally with economic and social service centers and should consider the efficient use of state offices and IT infrastructure.

Revisions to Title 16 and Education Regulations

Implementing this plan would require major revisions to Title 16 and State Board of Education regulations.

Student Transportation

Currently, school boards have the option to provide student transportation. The creation of a single statewide school district will open the student transportation conversation up to a broader discussion largely focused on equitable access to learning opportunities.

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